



Home

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VILLA MERKEL

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ANKA WENZEL **WILLIE
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In media coverage of the refugee crisis in Europe, the young unaccompanied male refugee has become a figure subjected to two contradictory characterizations: on the one hand, he is in need of protection and is searching for safety, and on the other, he is seen as a potential danger to societal stability. It is a constantly recurring theme that propagates distrust through media images and discourse.

In the video installation *Home*¹, Willie Doherty attends to this contemporary theme, one that is not directly connected to the problems of Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, *Home* reflects Doherty's particular sensitivity to changing political climates, resulting from decades of engagement with "the Troubles" and their depiction in the media in his homeland and beyond.

Doherty's 2004 video *Non-specific Threat*² was already concerned with the media-generated fear of the threat of global terrorism, as personified in the character of the unknown young man: The camera circles a man with a shaved head. An off-camera voice speaks in threatening tones of impending calamity. The man with the shaven head of a supposed skinhead is presented to the viewer as the epitome of unpredictable aggression, someone to be guarded

against – even without the presence of any concrete threat, the mere sight of the young man is sufficient.

The young man in *Home* presents the viewer with a similarly disconcerting reality. Here, it's not the shaved head but the dark physiognomy, the hooded sweatshirt and the backpack that seem suspicious. Against the background of current media debates, they conform to the casual categorization of a person as a refugee and with it the unanswered questions "Where did he come from?" and "Where is he going?".

The presentation of the video on two screens placed opposite each other is accompanied by a dominant roaring sound that seems to originate from the movement of traffic, or from the wind. While the entry area between the screens in the installation is defined by deep bass reverberations, the sounds become increasingly contoured as one nears either screen. The viewer is transported spatially through sound and her own movement between the screens into the sphere of the protagonist. Both find themselves to a similar extent in an inhospitable transit zone. In a series of concentrated images, the camera follows the young man. Aimless and apathetic, he walks along a high fence, or sits lost beneath a grey concrete overpass. Meanwhile, the camera captures the anonymity of the location. Branches entangled in the fence flutter in the wind. The water flowing under the bridge is slightly oily, as though contaminated. The young man begins to wash his hands with a ritualistic thoroughness, and to unload stones from his bag. Then he lies down next to the stones on the concrete floor, his forehead glistening with fever. Due to the undefined nature of the surroundings and the protagonist's actions, the viewer finds herself compelled by the optical and acoustic impressiveness of the carefully composed images and sound. The opposing screens intensify the concentration on individual images – disrupting the perception of a conventional linear plot progression.

It is clear that the place portrayed in the video is the exact opposite of "Home." A previously or subsequently existing home – the longing for a lost or future "Home" – is projected into the space. Willie Doherty has chosen a title that is of great import in the context of his body of work: one that cannot be unravelled in its political complexity, as "Home" indeed refers to a problem shared by the very different political contexts of "the Troubles" in Northern Ireland and the current refugee crisis.

The clothes and the appearance of the man are derived from online and newspaper images relating to the refugee crisis in summer 2015. The man is clearly recognizable as a refugee and hence as a "stranger." Just like the oil in the water, he appears as a potential source of contamination. But the mistrust is on both sides. With the ritual washing of his hands, the refugee is trying to protect himself against contamination.

The video *Home* provides a denser and more complex way of looking at the simplified media-formed image of the stereotype of the refugee. It focuses on a single, vulnerable person, who tries in his own way to maintain control of the situation.

1 Two-channel video installation, HD video, color,
5.1 digital surround sound, 6:30 min.

2 This work has two predecessors in Doherty's work, *Same Difference* (1990) and *They're All the Same* (1991), which deal with the media image of terrorists in the Northern Ireland conflict.

WILLIE DOHERTY HOME

